

Turning Point

By Charlene Newcomb; Illustrations by Mike Vilardi.

Twin moons hung majestically in the evening sky over the Locura Ocean. The orbs lit the coastline, softly illuminating the Tahika Cliffs and creating what appeared to be an air of tranquility.

A gentle breeze brushed the face of the tall, dark-haired young man who leaned against the balcony rail on the cliff top. Dair Haslip knew that breeze only added to the illusion of calm. For closer to the water, treacherous winds and unforgiving surf pummelled the cliffs.

Dair loved this place on his homeworld more than any other. Here he'd found solace in times of despair. He'd found inspiration. And now that he was preparing to leave Garos IV for the first time, he wanted every detail -- the surf, the winds, the cliffs, the moons -- etched into his memory. It might be a long time before he came home.

He'd grown up along these cliffs -- he looked south toward the point -- the lights of his grandmother's home were barely visible. He thought of Jos, his best friend, and the times they'd hiked the hill-sides using those lights as a beacon to guide them home. On nights just like this one, they'd planned their futures together at the Raithal Academy -- Dair shook his head glumly. Jos wouldn't be leaving with him now. The Empire did not look favorably upon someone whose father was wanted for treasonous crimes. Why did things have to turn out like this, he wondered?

Searching for an answer among the stars, Dair gazed skyward. There was no answer for Jos. But what Dair did see there filled his heart with pride.

Silhouetted against one moon, the Imperial *Lambda*-class shuttle descended through wispy clouds. It glided effortlessly toward the spaceport south of Ariana. That shuttle, and the Empire it represented, meant more to him now that he'd been accepted into the Academy. And with the Empire's interest in Garos IV growing more in evidence each day, there were promises of increased prosperity and jobs for Garosians, opportunities for young men like himself.

"Have you ever seen a more magnificent sight?" someone said from behind him.

Dair turned around. He straightened his lean frame, pulling back his shoulders. The deep, rich baritone voice didn't seem to fit the short-statured gentleman who joined him on the patio. "No, sir," he answered. "How are you this evening, Minister Paca?"

"Good. Very good," Paca replied, taking a deep breath of the sea air. "You are Dair Haslip, am I right?"

Dair threw him a smile, amazed that the Assistant Minister of Commerce remembered him from their first meeting over a year earlier.

"Yes, sir. I escorted my grandmother to the reception this evening."

Paca nodded. "Keriin Haslip. Yes, I'm quite familiar with your family, Dair," he said as he moved toward the balcony railing. "I admired your father's work. Such tragedy."

Dair looked away. He remembered how a Sundar bomb had taken both his parents during the ongoing civil war between native Garosians and colonists from Sundari. Even after six years, the pain wouldn't go away, "Do you think the Empire will be able to stop the violence, Minister Paca?" he asked.

"Minister Winger is working closely with Imperial officials toward that goal." Paca stared toward the horizon and sighed. "Of course," he said quietly, "there is a price to pay when the Empire *helps* a world."

"Well, sure," Dair said naively. "Higher taxes, a larger military presence. But then we'll have peace on Garos."

Paca looked over the railing at the sea pounding the cliffs far below them. "Peace," he repeated. There was a sadness in Paca's voice that caused Dair to turn and stare. But whatever he thought he'd heard quickly disappeared behind Paca's broad grin. "So, Mr. Haslip, what are your plans now that your grandmother has sold the mines?"

"I'm enrolled at the university now, sir. But I've been accepted to the Imperial Academy for the next term," Dair proudly replied.

"So you'll be leaving Garos for the larger universe up there," the older man said, pointing toward the stars. "Army or navy?"

"Army, sir. I like my feet on the ground."

Paca laughed. "I understand."

"All right, Magir Paca, I caught you! Are you corrupting my grandson?" Moonlight reflected off Keriin Haslip's long silvery hair. Her lined face hinted that she was no stranger to hard times. But there was a spark in her dark eyes, like a fire burning brightly, that even the bad times had not extinguished.

"Of course not, Madame Haslip. You know me better than that," he teased her, kissing the hand she extended toward him. "We've been discussing Dair's future. I've just heard his good news. Garos will be proud to have one of its finest young men attend the Academy."

Dair stood straighter, noticing the flash of pride that swept across his grandmother's face. But her smile seemed almost forced. Though he had noticed she'd grown quieter on the subject of his leaving Garos as that time grew close. He was her only family after all -- that would explain her lack of enthusiasm.

Keriin looped her arm through Dair's. "Tell me, Paca," she said, clearing her throat, "is there any truth to the rumors I've heard about Minister Winger?"

"I believe we are looking at our first Imperial governor," Paca said.

"Uncle Tork? I mean, Minister Winger?" Dair marvelled. "That's great, isn't it, Gram?"

"Uncle?" Paca questioned.

"The Wingers have always been like family," Keriin explained to an amused-looking Paca. "And yes, Dair, Tork Winger would be a good choice given his knowledge of the current peace negotiations with the Sundars," she added.

Paca nodded his agreement. "Yes, hopefully the Empire will not force a peace," he said, shifting uncomfortably when he caught the puzzled expression on Dair's face.

"Force a peace?" Dair frowned, looking from his grandmother to Paca as footsteps echoed across the old stone patio. He saw the tension drain from Paca's face.

"Minister Paca? I'm sorry to interrupt."

"What is it, Linsa?"

"Senior Lieutenant Brandei's shuttle has just landed. Minister Winger has been called away to meet with him."

"This late in the evening?" *How strange.* "Excuse me, Madame Haslip. Dair. I must speak with Minister Winger before he leaves."

"Of course, sir," Dair said. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, my friend," Keriin called to him. "Well, Dair, I guess we'll have to make other arrangements to get home this evening." Dair sighed. He'd been looking forward to the Winger's visit all week.

"Uncle Tork was going to tell me more about his days at the Academy," he told his grandmother.

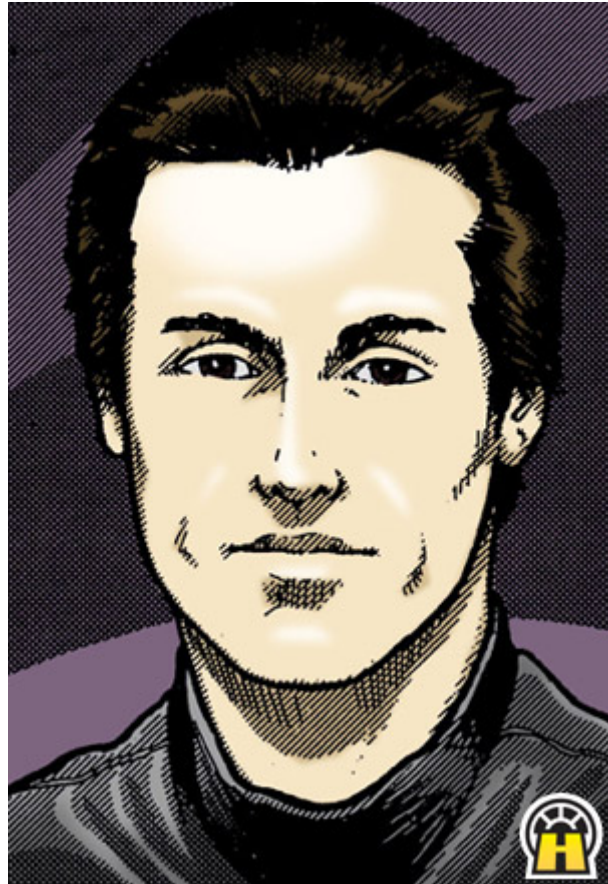
"Well, perhaps another night," she smiled. "So, tell me, young man, did you come outside to escape from us old folks?"

Dair took a deep breath. "I guess I was thinking about Jos, Gram. He should have been here tonight."

"He could have come with us, Dair."

"I told him that. But he said everyone would be talking about his father. And he was right, Gram! That's half the conversation I've heard! Did they capture old Desto Mayda yet? They're gonna terminate Mayda for sure!"

"I know Jos must be hurting," Keriin said. "Did you tell him that your acceptance had come through?"



"Yes. He was expecting it, but he really doesn't want to talk about it. But he did say he wants me to go."

"And you don't believe he's being sincere?"

"It's not that. It's just, I know how I'd feel if the situation were reversed. He's my best friend, Gram." A smile crossed Dair's face. One memory was so clear, like it had just happened yesterday. "Did I ever tell you what Jos and I did that summer after my tenth birthday?"

Keriin shook her head.

"You know that stretch of cliffs just south of Mount Usca -- we used to go climbing there all the time," Dair told her, noticing that even in the moonlight her face seemed to pale.

"I fell once," he continued. "I wasn't hurt bad, Gram. But I was so scared, I couldn't move."

"What happened?"

Dair chuckled. "Jos came down after me. I was gripping the rock face for dear life! Jos is next to me, dangling over the ocean from this rope. And he's carrying on a normal conversation like we were standing on flat ground. I bet he talked for 10 minutes, just dangling there! He had me laughing and before I knew it, we were scaling the cliff!" Dair sighed. "He was always there for me, Gram. And well, now I feel like I'm deserting him."

"Oh, Dair --"

"Keriin?"

Dair turned impatiently, disappointed that they'd been interrupted. But Sali Winger's arrival made him temporarily forget his depression over Jos. Aunt Sali had been his mother's closest friend. And she'd grown even closer to his grandmother in the years since West and Nieka Haslip's deaths.

Dair could see why Tork Winger called himself the luckiest man on the planet. A wife like Sali was the dream of every politician. Attractive, charming, and intelligent, she could turn a boring diplomatic affair into a tremendous success.

"Sali dear, is everything all right?" Keriin asked.

"Yes, everything's fine," Sali replied, smiling sweetly at Dair and giving his arm a gentle squeeze. "But as you've heard, Lieutenant Brandei has asked Tork and I to join him at the medical center."

"At the medical center? How odd!" Keriin observed.

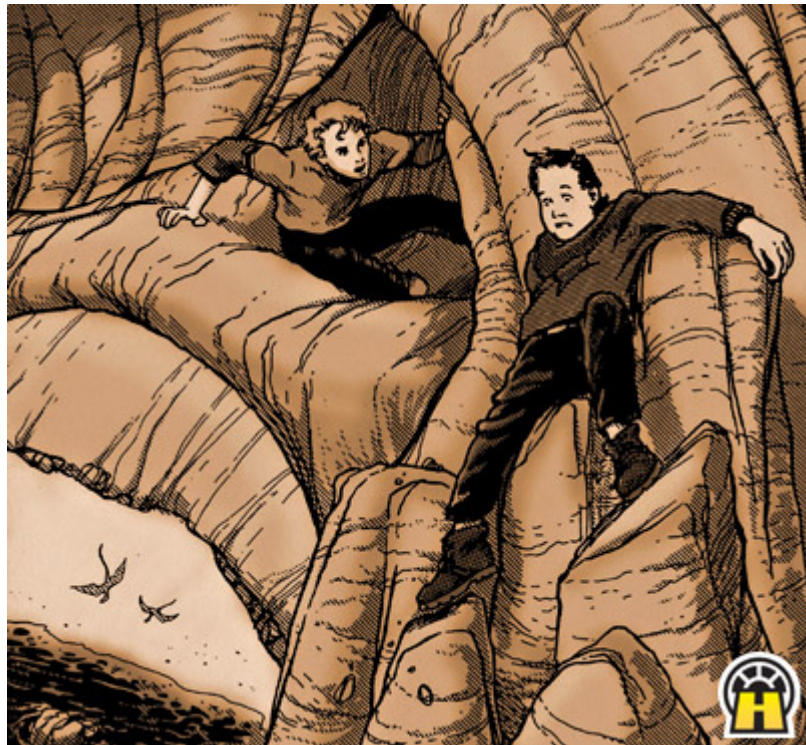
"Yes, I thought so, too. But he said he wants us to meet someone. If you don't mind coming with us, we can still stop by your house just as we'd planned, only after this meeting."

"Well, of course, dear. That will be just fine," she smiled. "Maybe we'll even invite the Lieutenant along!"

"What an excellent idea, Keriin," she said. "Dair, are you sure you don't mind leaving the reception?"

"No, not at all, Aunt Sali," Dair replied enthusiastically, excited by the prospect of meeting a naval officer from a Star Destroyer. He offered each woman an arm.

"Such a gentleman!" Sali said as they walked toward the door. "By the way, Dair, why haven't you and Jos been by the mansion lately? I hope Jos isn't embarrassed about the awful things I've been hearing about his father ..."



* * *

"Brandei, what in the worlds is this about?" Tork Winger asked, greeting his old friend. "What are we doing here?"

Brandei smiled mysteriously. "Come with me," he said.

Dair walked behind the group down the corridor of Ariana's medical center. Keeping a watchful eye on the Imperial lieutenant, Dair was impressed by his swift, deliberate gait and the way he held himself. Everything about the man exuded confidence. Dair wondered if graduation from Raithal Academy would endow him with such confidence.

"I understand you're here on your own," Winger was saying.

"I completed a special assignment in the Reega system, and was given permission to come ahead on 'unofficial' business, old friend," Brandei replied. "The *Judicator* will be arriving within a few days. The captain sends his regards, and asked me to tell you he will meet with you then."

"All right. But why are we here now?"



Brandei stopped in front of a glass wall which separated them from a patient's room. Dair saw a young lieutenant, not much older than himself, sitting by the bedside of a child. The child's head was bandaged and her face was bruised.

"Oh dear, that poor child!" Sali Winger gasped, reaching out toward Keriin for support.

"What happened?" Keriin asked.

"We found her, barely alive, in the rubble of a house after a raid. Damn Rebels," Brandei said, his voice filled with disgust. "The medics assure us she will recover. But the child has no family, Sali. They were killed in the raid."

Sali turned to her husband. Dair saw her eyes fill with tears. Then she looked at Brandei, hoping she read correctly the meaning behind his words. "You're going to leave her with us?" she asked.

Brandei took Sali's hand. He knew she'd been unable to have a child of her own. "I told the captain about you. He thought it was an excellent idea." He smiled gently. "Poetic justice, so to speak -- a Rebel child raised by an official of the Empire."

A Rebel child? Dair's mind raced a thousand kilometers a second. He wondered what kind of men could do this to their own people -- their own children.

"Do you know her name?" Sali asked as Dair caught Uncle Tork studying her reflection in the glass. There was no trace of the high-powered politician in his eyes, only a man deeply in love with his wife.

Brandei shook his head. "She's drifted in and out of consciousness, hasn't said a word."

"Who's the young man with her?" Winger asked.

"That's Lieutenant Chancellor. He's the one who dug her from the rubble. He seems to have appointed himself guardian."

"May I go in?"

"Of course, Sali."

"Keriin, come with me -- please?" she implored.

Keriin nodded, motioning for Dair to follow. He wondered why she seemed so insistent that he go into the sick bay. She knew how much he disliked these places -- too many memories of the time his parents died.

As the door slid shut behind them, Dair shuddered. Medical equipment hummed quietly, blinking sickening yellow and blue lights. The room was cold and uninviting. But only Dair seemed to notice.

"Lieutenant Chancellor, I was told you saved this child," Sali said as the young man slowly stood up and turned to face them. Piercing blue eyes met Sali's eyes. "Yes, ma'am. I --I just couldn't leave her there to die."

"Thank you for watching over her," she told him. "There's something special about this little girl, ma'am."

"Special?"

"It's like she was reaching out, drawing strength from everything around her, just trying to stay alive." He shook his head sadly. "Such a shame what happened to her home."

"A Rebel raid?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. We were looking for a Rebel stronghold right near this little one's home. Our forces destroyed half the city." He took the child's hand into his. "I never want to see anything like that again," he said quietly.

"Our forces?" Sali asked.

Chancellor's eyes were riveted on Sali. "Yes, ma'am. We did this," he said as a bitterness crept into his voice. "There were no Rebels there."

Sali stood speechless, her eyes widened in shock. Dair frowned, skeptical of what he'd heard. Surely there was some mistake. The lieutenant was exaggerating. "That can't be right," he said.

"I was there, kid. I know what I saw," Chancellor replied.

From the corner of his eye, Dair caught his grandmother's expression. Her gaze was transfixed on the child. And the silent nod of her head was more powerful a statement than any words. She believed him! *I don't understand this!*

Chancellor surprised Sali when he reached for her hand. "You take good care of her, ma'am," he said. Gently he placed the child's hand into hers.

"Yes, I will, Lieutenant," she told him. "Thank you for giving her a chance to live."

"A chance," he nodded. "Yes, ma'am. Good-bye, ma'am."

* * *

Wind rustled tree branches in the densely forested hillsides north of the mines. The baraka trees had taken on a purplish hue -- the weather would turn cooler soon. And though it was still three hours until sunset, thick shadows had begun to crawl upon the landscape. The mountains were alive with animal life, but it was the sound of human predators that worried Dair.

"Shhh! Would you be quiet! We could get in a lot of trouble," Dair whispered to his friend. He couldn't believe he'd let Jos talk him into this.

"For what? We aren't doing anything wrong," Jos Mayda replied in a tone that was uncharacteristically defiant.

"I don't know if those Imperial scout troopers would agree with you," Dair told him as he peered through his macrobinoculars.

Jos shrugged, pushing long golden locks out of his eyes. "You worry too much, Dair. We've been hiking out here in these hills for years. Your grandma owns all this land anyway!"

"She used, to," Dair reminded him, scanning the hillsides nervously.

Rolling his eyes, Jos scowled at that one minor detail. He leaned back against a tree, placed his hands behind his head, and sighed.

"Remember the time we got lost in the caves, Dair?"

Dair grimaced. "Yeah, I thought your dad was gonna blast us both when he found --" he paused, remembering the forbidden topic. "I'm sorry, Jos. I didn't mean --"

Jos shook his head. "It's okay. Gotta face facts, you know. We aren't kids anymore. My father's an outlaw, a traitor. I'll never see him again!"

There was more than just anger behind Jos' voice. "I know he cares about you, Jos."

"If he cares so much, then why couldn't he tell me, just explain to me, why he felt he had to work with the underground!" Jos exclaimed. He buried his face in his hands and suddenly burst into tears.

Dair sat silently sharing Jos' loss as if it were his own. He placed his hand on Jos' shoulder. He knew there were no words that would comfort his friend.

"You know, all I ever wanted was to go to the Academy," Jos finally said. "Remember our plans, Dair? We were gonna see the galaxy together! They'll never let me go to the Academy now!"

"Maybe there's still a chance, Jos. My gram could talk to Minister Winger -- "

"Oh, forget it, Dair! I'll be stuck on Garos forever!"

Frowning at his friend, Dair watched him wipe the tears from his eyes. Jos had changed so much these last few weeks. He'd always been able to make the best of any situation.

"Well, maybe I'll stay here, too," Dair told him. "We can both go to the university and then we'll open up our own business!"

Jos' brow wrinkled in disapproval. "No, Dair. You have to go." The frown on his face turned to a sly grin. "Yeah, I want you to go. Then you can tell me all about it, okay?" he said, picking up his macrobinoculars to scan the hillsides. "Yep, I want to hear all about crawling around in the muck and getting yelled at by drill sergeants!"

Dair laughed. "I won't leave out any of the details!" he promised. He knew that behind the smart remarks it had been harder for Jos to tell him to go than it had been for him to offer to stay.

"Look! Two troopers at 1-2-0," Jos said. "Boy, those speeder bikes sure are something. I heard they have top speeds of 500 kmh! Can you just imagine?"

"Quiet!" Dair whispered.

"I bet they're looking for that naval officer who deserted."

"Where'd you hear that tale, Jos?" Dair asked.

"Down at Chado's Pub. They were talking about this lieutenant -- I think his name was Chancellor."

"Chancellor?" Could it really be the officer he'd seen at the medical center a few days earlier?

"One of the guys said he was an aide to some officer from the *Judicator*!" Jos shook his head like he could hardly believe anyone would consider desertion. "C'mon, let's take a closer look at those scout troopers!"

"Are you crazy? It's too late anyway," Dair said.

"They just disappeared over the ridge. C'mon, let's go home."

Suddenly, Dair heard the whine of engines. Through a break in the trees he spotted the two speeder bikes. The scout troopers had circled around them and were moving in swiftly.

"C'mon, Jos! To the caves," he said, scampering across the hillside. Jos hesitated a few seconds then scrambled through the trees in the opposite direction from Dair.

Shots rang out. A few meters ahead of Dair, a sapling cracked as a blast ripped it in two. He dove into the underbrush just as another shot whipped over his head. Crawling on hands and knees, he fumbled through the bushes and into a cave.

Dair didn't even have time to catch his breath when he heard one of the speeder bikes stop nearby. Fallen tree branches crackled under armored footsteps. The scout trooper drew closer.

Dair's heart pounded. He crouched, unmoving, in a dark recess of the cave, hoping the trooper would give up his search. From experience Dair knew that the mineral content of the mountains on this part of Garos played havoc with sensors. And inside the cave, he'd be shielded from their probes.

The scout trooper batted aside some bushes near the entrance to the cave. Then suddenly he stopped, and Dair realized that someone was shouting in the distance. Blaster fire echoed through the hills. The scout trooper bolted back toward his bike.

Dair cautiously poked his head through the bushes, catching a fleeting glimpse of the speeder bike as it whipped over the crest of a nearby hill. He was safe. But what about Jos? That blaster fire he'd heard -- what if they'd caught Jos?

Dair dashed up the hillside after the scout trooper. From his vantage point a few minutes later, he spotted two deserted speeder bikes halfway down the hill. He moved silently toward them.

Muffled voices floated through the air in a deathlike litany. Then, some 10 meters away from the bikes, he saw the white armor against the greenish-brown backdrop of forest. One blaster rifle was trained on a prone figure.

"Please, no," Dair whispered to himself as he moved behind the bikes for cover. Jos' hand twitched. Dair breathed a sigh of relief as his friend slowly rose to his knees.

"Where's your comrade?" one of the troopers asked Jos.

"Get up, spy!" the other one shouted.

Dair couldn't hear Jos' reply, but watched as he tried to stand. "You're not? Then what are you doing out here near the mines? Didn't you know this is a restricted area?"

Jos answered, but still too softly for Dair to understand.

"Hiking? Makes for a good story, spy!" the trooper grunted. "Let's take him back to headquarters," he told the other trooper. "Move it!"

Suddenly, Jos lunged forward, taking one scout trooper down. They rolled across the ground, and Jos struggled to gain control of the man's blaster rifle. But as he ripped it away from his opponent, the rifle flew through the air, landing only an arm's length from Dair. Jos untangled himself from the scout trooper's grasp. He scrambled to his feet and took off, not knowing that Dair had retrieved the blaster.

The other trooper aligned his gun sight on the fleeing figure. One deadly shot pierced the air. Jos collapsed to the ground.

"No!" Dair screamed. Two startled scout troopers turned simultaneously to face him. Another blast echoed across the mountainside.

Jos' killer was dead.

Visibly shaken, Dair kept the blaster rifle trained on the other scout trooper. "Don't move!" Dair yelled at him. He didn't want to kill an unarmed man.

The trooper ignored him, recovering his fallen comrade's rifle in a diving roll across the forest floor. Two shots were fired. And suddenly the mountainside seemed coldly silent.

The second scout trooper lay dead. Dair stared at the rifle in his trembling hands, then threw it to the ground.

"Jos!" he cried out, running to his fallen friend.

Dair took the lifeless hand into his. Stunned, he sat beside Jos for a long time unable to move, unable to think.

As darkness crept in upon the mountain, Dair wept. Through his tears he gently closed Jos' eyes.



Dair collapsed on the stone steps of the patio. He stared at the sea. It offered no peace for him tonight. A breeze swept gently off the water. It mingled with the smell of fresh-baked shrail, one of his grandmother's special treats, which wafted from the kitchen. He could hear her working there.

There was no way he could sneak into the house. She'd hear him. He allowed himself a smile. He remembered that Jos had said his grandmother had ears as sharp as the wild boetays that roamed the Garosian mountainsides.

Jos. A tear formed in his eye. Jos was dead.

"Dair, is that you?" her voice rang out from the kitchen.

"Yes, Gram, it's me," he called, wiping the tear with a dirt-streaked hand as the door onto the patio opened.

She couldn't help noticing how filthy he was. "Good skies, son! What in the worlds happened to you?"

Biting his lip, Dair turned to look at her. She could see the pain in his eyes.

"We need to talk," she said firmly. "Get cleaned up. I'll make us some tea." He nodded, his head hung low. Then he trudged up to his room. Fifteen minutes later, Gram Haslip poured their tea and sat down across the table from her only grandson.

"Well, you look a whole lot better," she said, trying to cheer him up.

"Oh, Gram -- " Tears welled up in his eyes.



She placed her hand on top of his. "What happened?" "It's Jos, Gram. He's dead."

"What!" she exclaimed. "How?"

"We were near the mines. Two scout troopers thought we were spying. They killed Jos! They shot him in the back, Gram!"

If she was shocked by that revelation, he could see no sign of it in her face. "What happened to the scout troopers, Dair?"

"I -- I killed them." He hesitated. "And I hid their rifles in a cave near the cliffs," he said, trying to sort through his feelings -- he wasn't sure why he'd done it, but it just seemed the right thing to do at the time.

Keriin Haslip pulled her chair around the table. She wrapped her arms around Dair and held him tightly. "It's okay, Dair," she reassured him. "Everything will be all right."

"I can't believe they'd shoot an unarmed man in the back, Gram!" Dair finally said when his tears stopped flowing. "Is that what I will become if I join the Imperial Army?"

"The Empire doesn't follow the rules of civilized beings, Dair," she told him. "It follows its own rules and changes them to suit its own needs."

"Is that how you've always felt about the Empire, Gram?" he asked her.

"Yes."

"But you sold the mines to them! And you were going to let me go to the Academy!"

"I was forced to sell the mines, Dair. I had no choice. And you had to make up your own mind about the Empire -- what is right, what is wrong." She paused, searching his eyes. Past the grief, she found what she was looking for. "In time, I knew you would find the answer."

Dair nodded. "What do we do now, Gram?" he asked.

"The Imperials will assume the underground did this. I must get word to -- " She stopped mid-sentence.

Dair stared at his grandmother and frowned. "Get word to whom, Gram?"

Keriin Haslip studied her grandson's handsome face, his dark eyes so like his father's. He'd grown up quite a bit in these last few hours. He'd learned a hard lesson about life. About the Empire. It was time.

"Gram?"

"I have certain friends who will need to know what happened near the mines today."

"Friends?"

"Dair, I think its time you knew the truth about your old Gram. C'mon, let's go. There are some people I want you to meet."

* * *

The chamber deep beneath the university library was dank, not unlike the caves where Dair had played as a child. Air whistled through a vent in the ceiling, and Dair could have sworn he felt the vibrations of the sea pounding the nearby cliffs.

Bare except for a table and some chairs, the room was lit by a holographic map of the city of Ariana and the area surrounding the mines. Even in the dim light, Dair could see the grim expression on a half dozen faces as they listened to his story.

Dair glanced around the table. He knew the two men on either side of his grandmother: Assistant Minister Magir Paca, whom he'd spoken to only a few days before, and Desto Mayda, his friend's father. A third man he recognized from newsvid releases covering the Garosian civil war. Camron Gelorik, a leader of the radical Sundars, now sat peacefully with Garosians he once ordered his followers to hunt down. Garosian and Sundar united. Their fight against the Empire had begun.

"He was just a boy!" Mayda exclaimed as Dair finished describing what had transpired near the mines. "Damn them all!"

"You realize the Imperials will blame the underground for this," Keriin Haslip told the group.

"I can see the newsvid now," Gelorik added. "'Scout troopers shot while trying to protect innocent boy from underground hooligans!'"

Several murmured their agreement, but Paca held his hand up to silence them. "Unlike the Empire, we don't kill innocent people," he reminded them. "Our friends know us better than that."

"But we should still get word out," Keriin Haslip said. "Everyone should know what animals they are!"

Desto Mayda shook his head. "That could be dangerous for your grandson, Keriin. Dair's friendship with Jos is well known," he said.

"Yes," Paca agreed, "Desto is right. If word gets out that someone was with Jos at the time of his murder, the Imperials would no doubt investigate Dair."

"That could lead to too many questions," Gelorik said quietly. He studied Dair's face. "And it could lead them back to us."

"You mean we have to cover up the truth?" Dair asked. "You're going to let them accuse you of murder?"

"I'm afraid so, son," Desto said. "At least for now."

Dair nodded, understanding these people were doing more than just placing their trust in him. This was a sacrifice that could make more enemies for the underground. It was a sacrifice for him. And he wasn't even one of them. Yet. "Can I do anything to help?" he asked.

"Well," Paca said, "we'll need to send a team in to retrieve those blaster rifles that you hid."

"I'd like to go with them, Minister, I mean, Paca," Dair told him.

"Good, son. We're glad to have you for as long as you're on Garos. You'll be headed to Raithal Academy soon, won't you?" Paca asked him.

"What!" Dair shook his head in disbelief. "I can't go to the Academy now. I don't want to be one of them!"

Desto Mayda grabbed Dair's hand from across the table, startling him. "Don't you see, Dair? You have the opportunity to work against the Empire from the inside, like Paca does at the Ministry."

"You can't turn down your acceptance now. Think how suspicious that might look," Paca said.

Dair began to see a career with the Empire in a whole different light.

"It may take you years. Undercover work can be a slow and tedious process. But little things, like supplies sent to the wrong command -- "

"Minor computer glitches -- " Mayda added.

"Orders not processed in a timely fashion --" someone else said. "All will undermine Imperial efforts," Paca continued. "Just think of the possibilities."

"Eventually, you ask for a transfer back to Garos. You'll be invaluable to us!" Gelorik told him.

"Think about it, son," Paca said.

Looking at each face in turn, Dair's eyes finally came to rest on his grandmother. Her eyes glistened with tears. Keriin Haslip knew what his choice would be. She might be losing her grandson to the Empire, but it wasn't on their terms. It was on hers.

* * *

Dair stood in the hallway staring at the reflection in the mirror -- the reflection of someone who'd matured quickly to manhood these last few months. He felt stronger, more confident than ever. But as he embarked on this journey, he realized that he'd be alone out there, surrounded by people who blindly served the Empire. But he was determined to play the game their way, to learn everything he could learn. He *would* make a difference!

Straightening his blue-gray tunic, he nodded to himself. The double doors of the great room opened and Keriin Haslip beckoned to her grandson.

Dair took a deep breath and joined her in the doorway as applause broke out. He looked at the faces of his friends and blushed with embarrassment. A group of former classmates rushed up, slapping his back and shaking his hand.

Across the room Dair saw newly-appointed Imperial Governor Winger in an animated discussion with Magir Paca. Though he was no longer naive about the true nature of the Empire, Dair still had to admire Uncle Tork. Winger had turned out to be the voice of moderation, calling for an end to the Imperial purge of radicals on both sides of the civil war. Dair understood now what Paca had meant by "force a peace."

"Good luck, son," Paca said, shaking Dair's hand firmly.

"Thank you, Minister Paca," he replied. They'd said their private good-byes in the underground operations center only a few hours before.

"Dair, I couldn't be more proud if you were my own son," Winger said.

"Thank you, Governor," Dair replied. "I only hope I live up to everyone's expectations." He glanced toward his grandmother and Paca.

"You will, son," Winger said. "I've no doubt about that. You've been through some rough times here." He shook his head. "I'm still hoping they find those radicals who killed poor Jos Mayda -- "

Keriin Haslip nodded, almost imperceptibly, to Paca.

"I know you'll come through Raithal just fine," Winger said. "It's an experience you'll never forget. Or regret. Why, I remember when I was at the Academy on Carida -- "

"Oh, Tork! None of your old war stories now! We're supposed to be celebrating," Sali Winger said, playfully pushing her husband aside to give Dair a hug.

"Ah, yes. Well, Dair, you show them we're a tough bunch."

"I will, Governor. How are you, Madame Winger?" Dair greeted her.

"Dair, I can't believe you're leaving us! Just look at you! Your parents would be so proud!" she said, reaching back to grasp an unseen hand. "Alexandra, come and say good-bye to Dair," she urged the dark-haired child.

Sparkling blue eyes peeked around Sali's gown.

"Hello, Alex."

"Hi," she said holding her hand out for him to shake.

"I'm gonna miss our weekly card games," he said.

"You promised to teach me to play sabacc, remember?"

"Yeah, so you could beat me at that, too!" he laughed. "C'mon, let's check out our favorite view one more time," he said, taking the small hand into his and leading her outside onto the patio. He felt her fingers tighten around his.

"I bet you'll be all grown up when I come back," he told her as Garos' second moon made its debut on the horizon. And suddenly, a lump formed in his throat and his heart ached. He found himself thinking about Jos again.

"You miss him, don't you?" Alex asked quietly.

"Yeah," he nodded. "Huh? How did you know I was thinking about Jos?"

Alex shrugged. "Why do you have to leave?" she asked.

Dair picked her up in his arms. "You know I'm joining the Imperial Army."

Alex shrunk back from him for a moment. Then she looked at him, studying his face with those blue eyes of hers. He'd never seen such intensity in someone so young. It was almost as if she could see right through him.

Cracking her finger to draw him close, Alex whispered into his ear. "I don't believe you," she said. "But I won't tell."

Dair stared in amazement, then smiled at her. "Okay," he whispered back to her. "Thanks."



A cold wind blew across the clifftops. Dair and Alex watched the sea pound the cliffs, the violent forces of nature at work. There were other violent forces at work on Garos, forces of a man-made nature -- and they had changed Dair's life forever.